

✓ Duck Hunting in Duxbury: Just Another Day at the Office

By CAPT. DAVID BITTERS

It was my birthday, and after chores and family commitments, I wished to go hunting one last time, before season's end. The duck season was just about done for another year, but there was still an hour left before sunset and I really wanted to get out. I did not care this day if I got ducks or not. I just wanted to walk the gun in the marshes of Duxbury, as my family has done for generations, one last time, before it was all over for another year.

As fate would have it, I hadn't walked five minutes into the marsh, when a pair of mallards exploded into the air. I had surprised them, and they me, from one of the narrow ditches in the Back River. I swung the Browning, picked out one of the ducks, and fired a quick snap shot, in the Churchill method of shooting. A split-second before the "boom," the ducks had crossed in the air, and at the pull of the trigger, both ducks folded and fell to the earth. "A pair dead in the air" as they say, with a single shot.

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—Captain David Bitters

My pair of mallards landed belly up on the snow-covered marsh, across the creek, 35 yards away. No problem. I figured I'd just walk up the creek until it was narrow enough to cross over on the incoming high tide. Then I'd walk back down and retrieve my birds. I unloaded my gun and started up river. I walked a solid half-mile, jumping frozen ditches and ice covered pot holes that you could not see until it was too late. I walked all the way to Crab Island and I learned a new lesson I shall never forget nor fail to pass along to my children's children: There is no place to cross the Duck Hill River at high tide in Duxbury!



To make matters worse, I had fallen in numerous times on my way up the river. My waders were filling with water and I had no gloves. The temperature was 20 degrees and falling fast with the last light of day. This was supposed to be a simple walk with the gun in the marsh, just another day at the office, but it was not turning out that way. My final plunge was into the deepest, coldest, ice- and snow-covered ditch I have ever fallen into. Somehow, I cut my hand on the way down, as frigid, icy, waters filled up my waders and I became submerged up to my arm pits.

I slung my gun up onto the bank and desperately grabbed at any vegetation I could. Most of it broke off in my hands, but one clump held, and I was able to pull myself out of the water. The thick, oozing marsh muck tried its hardest to cement me to the bottom. But I remembered the stories of my youth, of gunners being rescued in this very river, at the last possible second, breathing through their gun barrels, as the tide washed over them. There would be nobody rescuing me this evening if I could not get out.

Good things happen on your birthday. Back up on the bank. I was totally soaked and starting to freeze. No time to empty the water out of my waders. I was too cold to even try, although I thought about it for a split second. Fortunately for my hands, my friend Dr. Cassidy had talked me into keeping hand warmers in the pockets of my duck coat earlier in the season. Let me tell you, they work and work well. Without them, I'm sure my hands

would have frozen and things would have gone from bad to worse.

Standing there in the gathering darkness, I quickly determined that if I did not start running, I was going to freeze to death. So, that is what I did. I ran as fast and as hard as I could, back across the marsh. I retraced my steps in the snow, mindful of all the ditches and pot holes I had fallen in, while water sloshed in my waders all the way.

Then something wonderful happened. As I ran, I began to get warm. Really warm. In fact, I began to sweat! All those layers of 100 percent wool I have worn all these years were finally paying off! "Wool is warm even when wet" I must have heard a thousand times growing up hunting in Duxbury. Friend, if you ever fall into the icy waters of winter and are able to get yourself out, don't sit on the bank and wait to be rescued – start running – and don't stop until you are safe and sound. Run fast and run hard. You will be amazed at how warm you can get, even when you are completely soaked and your clothes are frozen stiff.

Well, when I got back to where I had started from, there were my ducks, still belly up on the bank, across the river. It was then that I remembered that fellow Bayman, Mike Gregg, had once given me a key to his canoe he kept chained up down in the marsh, during duck season. He said, "If you ever need it, it's there for you to use." As luck would have it, that key was in the inside, top pocket of the duck coat I happen to be wearing.

I found the canoe, dragged it to the river, and tried to paddle upstream to my ducks. Not a chance. The winds had picked up to 20 plus knots and there was no way I could paddle against the stiff breeze. It kept blowing me back down stream. Finally, quite exhausted, I got it back on shore just below to where I had launched. Only one thing to do: drag it 300 yards across the snow-covered marsh and put it in across from where my ducks lay.

There is something to this stubborn way of Yankee life I was raised in. "Get your ducks or die" was the unspoken rule ingrained into me as a child growing up in Duxbury. It was, and still is, a matter of principle. My forefathers called it "sissen." Fool-hearty, Yankee courage. Another unspoken rule of Yankee wisdom ingrained in me was, "If you're going to do something, then do it well. Sink your teeth in and don't let go until the job is done right or you have died trying."

A heart pounding, canoe dragging, 20 minutes later I was standing on the marsh across the river from my ducks as darkness set in. I paddled across the river and retrieved my pair of birds. Then, with the wind at my back, I paddled down stream to stash the canoe where I had got it from. I had to stop twice on the way to try to get the feeling back into my fingers so I could feel the canoe paddle. Thank God for those hand warmers!

With the canoe stashed and chained back up, I grabbed my gun and birds and walked as briskly as I could out of the marsh in the dark. I was soaked, frozen solid, and slightly bloodied. It was the end of another great year of duck hunting in the marshes of Duxbury.

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